

Aspects of Ian Shanahan

Ben Loomes

Composer, chess problemist, recorder player, mathematician or philosopher? No, not a jack of all trades, but a master of more than a few.

Born in Sydney, in 1962, Ian Shanahan graduated with a Bachelor of Music from the University of Sydney in 1985, achieving first class honours and winning the University Medal. He excelled as a student with majors in Composition and Pure Mathematics. Now he is completing a PhD at the University of Sydney, after writing a preliminary thesis entitled 'Recorder unlimited': a study of some extended techniques of the recorder. He teaches harmony, composition and orchestration at the University of Sydney and the University of Western Sydney.

As a teacher, Ian Shanahan baffles a bit less than he inspires. Rattling off ten leads to any problem, it is difficult not to experience an information overload about halfway through a conversation with him. He speaks passionately: about the music he loves – from Debussy and Messiaen to Varèse, Stravinsky, Anton Webern and Schönberg; about contemporary thought; about mathematics; about chess; and especially about new chords (rather, sonorities) that he has found.

Composer Eric Gross, who taught Shanahan during his BMus studies, says that he now regards Shanahan as a life-long friend. 'He is a very outgoing person, a fantastic and enthusiastic communicator, and very generous in many ways,' says Gross.

Where his generosity wears thin and his communication skills are applied thickly is in the vehement letters and journal articles that have appeared in his name. Shanahan's thoughts about the directions modern music is taking, and of the forces driving the music we hear in concert halls and on the radio, are usually unleashed in forceful, thoughtful bursts of argument.

A great depth of thought surrounds all that this 30-something composer does. In his music, it is heard as a richness that

some might be tempted to call 'complexity'. But his music might be better described as having a high information content, as being full of life, infused with the brilliance of the natural world, the mathematics of astronomy, the geometry of the atomic lattice structure of crystals or the logarithmic spiral of seeds in a sunflower.

'As a composer and musician he has a remarkably sharp and analytical brain, which he is able to combine with an infinite devotion to detail, while never losing sight of the overall picture,' says Eric Gross. 'I have always found Ian's compositions stimulating and interesting. His music is the kind of music that makes demands on the listeners; it stimulates the listener. One can never just sit back and be passive,' Gross says.

The rewards for breaking into the Shanahan sound world are great. Somewhere in between the glass-of-red-cordial style of some minimalists and the handful-of-rocks-to-the-ear that is Varèse, Ian Shanahan's music sparkles and shines with warm and continually engaging sounds. The 'static' nature of the types of structures he uses can quickly lift the listener 'out of time' and refresh a stagnant mind and ear.

It would be easy to label Ian Shanahan

'the complete musician'. When he is not composing and teaching, he is known as a recorder virtuoso who works ceaselessly around Australia performing primarily post-1960 music, as a soloist and with groups such as australYSIS, ELISION, and even The Renaissance Players, for whom he has composed a work to be premiered in the Eighth Sydney Spring Festival. He continues to add to contemporary recorder technique, aspects of which are exemplified in his three one-minute works for recorder, *Cathy's song*, *Helical ribbon*, and *Lingua silens florum*, which can be heard in the program 'Converging with Silence' at 4pm on Friday, 15 August.

The future seems bright for this bold Australian composer, as he continues to push the barriers of our musical experience. With each new work we are sure to be given, through his struggles, insights into the nature of the world, hope for the future of music, and refreshment for tired ears.

'Converging with silence: the music of Ian Shanahan' can be heard on Friday, 15 August, at 4pm.

